

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A method performed by a first gaming machine comprising:

receiving wagers from a player playing paid games on the first gaming machine;

detecting a free game bonus round initiation signal;

enabling the player to play N free games, where N is greater than or equal to 1;

and

granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played.
2. The method of Claim 1 wherein granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played comprises granting an award to the player based on an outcome of one or more particular free games.
3. The method of Claim 1 wherein granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played comprises granting an award to the player based on a display of a particular symbol during one or more of the free games.
4. The method of Claim 1 wherein granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free games played comprises granting an award to the player based on a display of a particular symbol across an activated payline during one or more of the free games.
5. The method of Claim 1 wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a jackpot, a portion of a jackpot, a fixed award, a progressive award, or a mystery award to the player.
6. The method of Claim 1 wherein the first machine is connected within a system of gaming machines, and wherein other eligible gaming machines within the system of gaming machines also receive a free game bonus round initiation signal.

7. The method of Claim 1 further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes from each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting an award to the player based on accumulated winning units from winning outcomes of free game played.

8. The method of Claim 7 further comprising detecting a signal that the player has won more winning units during the free game bonus round than other players participating in the free game bonus round and, in response to such detecting, awarding the player an additional award.

9. The method of Claim 7 wherein the winning units are credits.

10. The method of Claim 7 wherein the winning units are points.

11. The method of Claim 1 further comprising:

accumulating an amount in a free game pot based at least partially on a percentage of wagers from the paid games, the free game pot for funding the free game bonus round; and

deducting amounts from the free game pot to fund the free games being played.

12. The method of Claim 11 further comprising:

detecting a level of the free game bonus pot; and

determining that the level of the free game pot is sufficient to fund all free games played during the free game bonus round prior to the free game bonus round initiation signal being generated.

13. The method of Claim 12 further comprising calculating a level of the free game pot sufficient to pay for all free games played during the free game bonus round.

14. The method of Claim 13 wherein calculating the level comprises multiplying N by a maximum bet for the first gaming machine.

15. The method of Claim 13 wherein calculating the level comprises calculating the total amount of virtual wagers that will be bet during the free game bonus round.

16. The method of Claim 13 wherein the first gaming machine is connected within a system of gaming machines, and wherein other eligible gaming machines within the system of gaming machines also receive a free game bonus round initiation signal, wherein calculating the level comprises multiplying the number of machines within the system by N and by a maximum bet for the machines.

17. The method of Claim 13 wherein the first gaming machine is connected within a system of gaming machines, and wherein other eligible gaming machines within the system of gaming machines also receive a free game bonus round initiation signal, wherein calculating the level comprises multiplying the number of machines participating in the free game bonus round by N and by a maximum bet for the machines.

18. The method of Claim 11 further comprising dynamically adjusting the percentage of wagers from the paid games to the free game pot depending on a level of the free game pot.

19. The method of Claim 18 wherein dynamically adjusting comprises:

setting the percentage at a first percentage when the level of the free game pot is below a certain level; and

setting the percentage at a second percentage, different from the first percentage, when the level of the free game pot is above a certain level.

20. The method of Claim 11 wherein each free game played is a game played with the player's last wager from the paid games prior to the initiation of the free game bonus round.

21. The method of Claim 1 wherein each free game played is a game played with the player's last wager from the paid games prior to the initiation of the free game bonus round.

22. The method of Claim 1 further comprising filling, with a percentage of the wagers for the paid games, a plurality of pots used for the free game bonus round, the plurality of pots including a jackpot and a free game pot, the free game pot being used to fund the free game bonus round.

23. The method of Claim 22 wherein the plurality of pots further comprises a hidden jackpot for supplying an initial level of the jackpot after the jackpot has been won.

24. The method of Claim 22 further comprising dynamically allocating a percentage of the wagers for the paid games to the jackpot and the free game pot depending on the level of the free game pot.

25. The method of Claim 1 further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a jackpot based on the number of winning units won during the free game bonus round.

26. The method of Claim 1 further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a first bonus amount if a number of winning units won during the free game bonus round exceeds a first level, and granting a second bonus amount if a number of winning units won during the free game bonus round exceeds a second level, higher than the first level.

27. The method of Claim 1 further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on a random event.

28. The method of Claim 1 further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on a random time event.

29. The method of Claim 1 further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on an outcome of the gaming machine.

30. The method of Claim 1 further comprising generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on a predetermined event.

31. The method of Claim 1 further comprising:

funding a jackpot from a percentage of wagers from the paid games; and
generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on the jackpot reaching a certain level.

32. The method of Claim 1 further comprising:

funding two or more jackpots from different percentages of wagers from the paid games; and

generating the free game bonus round initiation signal based on any of the jackpots reaching a certain level.

33. The method of Claim 1 wherein the paid games comprise spinning reels having symbols, where awards are based on combinations of symbols obtained after the reels stop spinning.

34. The method of Claim 33 wherein the spinning reels are displayed on a video screen.

35. The method of Claim 1 wherein the method further comprises awarding a jackpot based on an outcome of a free game bonus round.

36. The method of Claim 1 wherein the method further comprises awarding one of a plurality of jackpots based on an outcome of a free game bonus round.

37. The method of Claim 1 further comprising a jackpot controller, independent from the first gaming machine, controlling the first gaming machine to display a jackpot winning outcome.

38. The method of Claim 1 further comprising a jackpot controller, independent from the first gaming machine, controlling the first gaming machine to display a near miss of a jackpot winning outcome.

39. The method of Claim 1 further comprising accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, and wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting a bonus amount, wherein the amount depends on a number of winning units accumulated during the free game bonus round.

40. The method of Claim 1 further comprising splitting a jackpot amongst players at the end of the free game bonus round.

41. A gaming machine comprising:

a display for displaying paid games to a player; and

at least one processor for carrying out the following method:

detecting a free game bonus round initiation signal;

enabling the player to play N free games, where N is greater than or equal to 1; and

granting an award to the player based on a certain outcome of the free game played.

42. The machine of Claim 41 wherein the machine is connected within a system of gaming machines, and wherein other eligible gaming machines within the system of gaming machines also receive a free game bonus round initiation signal.

43. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising the at least one processor accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, wherein granting an award comprises granting an award to the player based on accumulated winning units from winning outcomes of free game played.

44. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising the at least one processor detecting a signal that the player has won more winning units during the free game bonus round than other players participating in the free game bonus round and, in response to such detecting, awarding the player an additional award.

45. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising the at least one processor accumulating an amount in a free game pot based on a percentage of wagers from the paid games, the free game pot for funding the free game bonus round, and deducting amounts from the free game pot to fund the free games being played.

46. The machine of Claim 45 further comprising the at least one processor detecting a level of the free game bonus pot, and determining that the level of the free

game pot is sufficient to fund all free games played during the free game bonus round prior to the free game bonus round initiation signal being generated.

47. The machine of Claim 41 wherein the paid games comprise spinning reels having symbols, where awards are based on combinations of symbols obtained after the reels stop spinning.

48. The machine of Claim 47 wherein the spinning reels are displayed on a video screen.

49. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising a communications port for receiving a signal from a jackpot controller, independent from the gaming machine, to control the gaming machine to display a jackpot winning outcome.

50. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising a communications port for receiving a signal from a jackpot controller, independent from the gaming machine, to control the gaming machine to display a near miss of a jackpot winning outcome.

51. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising the at least one processor accumulating winning units from winning outcomes of each free game played, wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting an award to the player based on accumulated winning units from winning outcomes of free game played, and wherein the winning units are credits.

52. The machine of Claim 41 further comprising the at least one processor accumulating winning units from winning outcomes from each free game played, wherein granting an award to the player comprises granting an award to the player based on accumulated winning units from winning outcomes of free game played, and wherein the winning units are points.

53. A jackpot controller for a system of gaming machines comprising:

at least one processor for detecting a level in a free game pot for funding a free game bonus round, and triggering a free game bonus round for eligible gaming machines only after the free game pot is deemed sufficient to fund the free game bonus round.

54. A gaming method for use by one or more gaming machines comprising:

conducting paid games;

conducting a bonus round, the bonus round being initiated by a triggering event;

allocating funds to a plurality of pots, including a funding pot for funding the bonus round, wherein allocating funds comprises allocating percentages of wagers for playing the paid games to the plurality of pots; and

dynamically adjusting the percentages of wagers to the plurality of pots depending on a level of at least one of the pots.

55. The method of Claim 54 wherein dynamically adjusting the percentages of wagers to the plurality of pots comprises:

setting the percentage allocated to the funding pot at a first percentage when the level of the funding pot is below a certain level; and

setting the percentage allocated to the funding pot at a second percentage, different from the first percentage, when the level of the funding pot is above a certain level.

56. The method of Claim 54 further comprising determining when the level of the funding pot is at least sufficient to fully fund the bonus round, and wherein setting the percentage allocated to the funding pot at a second percentage when the level of the funding pot is above a certain level comprises setting the percentage allocated to the funding pot at the second percentage when it is determined that the funding pot is at least sufficient to fully fund the bonus round.

57. The method of Claim 54 wherein the plurality of pots further comprises a jackpot.

58. The method of Claim 54 wherein the paid games comprise spinning reels having symbols, where awards are based on combinations of symbols obtained after the reels stop spinning.